

The
Humboldt Bay Region
1850-1875

A Study
in the American Colonization
of California

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carried and extent of country drained, is the largest in northwestern California. The Klamath, the name given to both streams after their junction, takes its rise in the Klamath Lakes in southern Oregon, near the California line. After flowing southward into California it takes a westerly course nearly parallel with the state boundary, then southwest until it joins with the Trinity. It then turns abruptly, taking the northwesterly direction common to the other streams.

Along the whole of its course, with the exception of Shasta and Scott's River valleys, the stream flows through a rough mountainous country affording little or no opportunity for agricultural development. It was found to be rich in gold deposits, however, and during the early fifties became the center of much mining activity, especially along the Salmon and Scott's River branches. When first discovered it was believed to be a navigable stream, and a town was laid out on its banks some distance from the ocean; but the shifting sands at its mouth soon put an end to such a plan.⁷

The Trinity River has its source in the mountains around Mount Shasta, a short distance from the headwaters of the Sacramento River. In a manner similar to the Klamath it flows southwesterly along the western side of the Trinity Mountains, later turning in the general northwesterly direction and being joined by the Klamath, which then takes the course pursued by the Trinity. The region through which it flows is almost entirely mountainous, furnishing rich deposits for the goldseeker but affording little opportunity to the agriculturist. This river was discovered and named by Major P. B. Reading in 1845,⁸ when he crossed the mountain range west of the Sacramento River in search of fur-bearing animals. Believing it to flow into Trinidad Bay, discovered by the Spaniards, he named it the "Trinity River." Mining on this stream was begun by Reading in 1848 and has been carried on continuously since his time.

Lesser Streams. A few of the smaller streams yet remain to be considered. Between the Klamath and Mad River two streams have been mentioned. The more northerly of these is known as Redwood Creek, a name derived without

⁷ *Infra*, 68 n. 14.

⁸ It doubtless was known to the earlier trappers, for it lay on the route taken by Jedediah Smith in 1828, *infra*, 32.

doubt from the heavy redwood forests near its mouth and for some distance along its course. It rises nearly east of Humboldt Bay along the Bald Hills which stretch for some distance along the back country beyond the redwood forests. This region is particularly adapted to grazing purposes, and in places offers excellent opportunities for small farms. North of Mad River and a short distance south of Trinidad Bay is a small stream known as Little River. It lies wholly within the redwood belt, and with the exception of the excellent timber that has been found there it has been of little economic importance.

On the southern part of the Humboldt coast two rivers of some importance are to be noted. The first of these is Bear River, which enters the ocean about two miles north of Cape Mendocino. It is not of great length nor of much value in itself, but flows through a region excellently adapted to stock-raising and dairy purposes, and to some extent to agriculture. Farther south is the Mattole River, of greater length and of more importance. It has its source very near the southern limit of Humboldt County and flows in a northwesterly direction almost parallel to the coast line, entering the ocean a few miles south of Cape Mendocino. The higher lands are well adapted to grazing purposes, while the river bottom, although of no great breadth, affords excellent agricultural lands. The high mountains rising between this valley and the coast exclude the cold ocean winds and fogs and thus permit the raising of crops to which the coast in general is not adapted. Early in the development of the region deposits of petroleum and natural gas were discovered, the exploitation of which from time to time has been attempted with much enthusiasm but with unsatisfactory results.⁹

*Humboldt Bay.*¹⁰ Having discussed the various streams flowing to the north and south of Humboldt Bay we shall now give attention to this body of water which lends its name to the region under consideration. The form of the bay is that of a large lagoon,¹¹ and strange as it may seem, notwithstanding its size and importance it is not fed by

⁹ *Infra*, chapter XIV.

¹⁰ The Indian name for the bay was Qual-a-wa-loo.

¹¹ There are three smaller lagoons on the coast north of Trinidad, the more important being Big Lagoon and Stone Lagoon.

any stream of consequence into the bay as follows:

The bay is irregular in shape and varies from 10 to 20 miles in length. Its longer axis is from north to south and is about 15 miles long. There are several channels of 1/2 mile width leading from the water to Arcata. The bay is about eighteen miles wide at its southern end.

A narrow strait about 1/2 mile in width connects the bay with the seaward side of the bay. Toward the bay the land is covered with grass, up to 3500 feet in elevation. The natural entrance to the bay is a narrow channel.

The high winds from the north and west are common. The average temperature is about 50 degrees. There are no rivers or streams flowing into the bay.

The peculiar formation of the bay is such that from ocean vessels there was little to be seen of the bay. The water, furthermore, is shallow in the low-lying entrance to the channel.¹²

The bar at the entrance is about 1/2 mile or less of a hindrance. It has been lost during a storm. A pilot boat had been lost during a storm. At the time of the report two fathoms of water were reported. Lieut. Ottinger, of the Treasury, gave the amount of the bar.

¹² United States Army.

¹³ *Infra*, 45, n. 24.

¹⁴ *Infra*, 122, n. 29.

¹⁵ *Infra*, 29; 130, n. 72.

One of those most active in this trade was Isaac Minor, who was engaged in the business for about seven years preceding the Indian troubles. He relates that he began with a train of twenty-five mules loaded with potatoes, which he purchased at Union for four cents a pound and sold in the mines for an ounce of gold per hundredweight.²⁵ In 1854 he purchased a store in Orleans, making it a station for supplies, which he packed in from Union. To supplement this business he later bought a ranch on Redwood Creek, which furnished beef and dairy products for the mines.

As time passed the mines on the lower Klamath became less profitable, and the mining population shifted farther up the river, toward Scott and Shasta valleys; and although trails from Union reached into this district, other sections were better able to compete successfully for the supply trade. Crescent City had a trail reaching the Klamath River near Happy Camp, a point about midway between Orleans and Scott's River, and other trails came in from southern Oregon.²⁶ These conditions, together with the rise of hostility of the Redwood Creek and Hoopa Indians in the early sixties, very effectively checked the packing trade with these mines, so that even though it continued despite the wars it was never again the important factor it had been during the earlier years.

Trade with Weaverville, 1853-1860. Just as during the earlier years the great bulk of the trade of the bay towns was carried on with the Klamath River mines, so in the later period the trade with Weaverville came to have a position of greater importance. This shift in trade was due largely to the change in the relative importance of the mines of the two districts.

By 1854 trade between Union and the Trinity mines had become so important that it was felt necessary to improve the trails leading in that direction,²⁷ and by the beginning of 1856 the project of building a wagon road between Hum-

²⁵ An ounce of gold was then worth about \$17.25, *San Francisco Herald*, Dec. 1, 1854. Allowing 200 pounds to the mule this would make a profit of over \$600. Isaac Minor, *Reminiscences*, MS.

²⁶ Minor, *Reminiscences*, MS., speaks of trade between Crescent City and Happy Camp. After 1857 this portion of the Klamath River was incorporated into Del Norte County. For other mention of the Oregon trails see Gibbs, in Schoolcraft, *Archives*, III, 158; Report of the Secretary of War, accompanying the President's annual message, 1851 (Serial 611), 145-146, 148.

²⁷ *Humboldt Times*, Jan. 13, 1855.

at that time 7400 apple, 3920 peach, 700 pear, 437 plum, 227 cherry, and 200 apricot trees in the county. Of the smaller fruits there were 4025 gooseberry bushes and 500 grape vines. During the next year the apple trees had increased to 9000, while the other fruits maintained about the same proportion. Among other varieties there were 400 quince trees, and 25 each of figs, almonds, and walnuts. There were now also 150 raspberry and 27,007 strawberry vines.

Stock-raising and Dairying, 1855-1859. The beginning of the stock industry in the region has already been mentioned and its later development has been described, in so far as it affected settlements, for its chief centers lay along the coast in the Bear and Mattole River districts, and in the interior on the Bald Hills in the region beyond the redwood belt.⁷¹ This latter district had a decided advantage during the earlier years on account of its proximity to the mines, which furnished a ready market.

Although the stock-raising and dairy business are not identical the statistics given make it difficult to distinguish between the two, but we may judge that both were important factors. The surveyor general's report for 1856 shows Humboldt County had produced 80,000 pounds of butter during the previous year, which placed it second in rank among butter producing counties; 2000 pounds of cheese were also made in the county, and in this industry it held sixth place.⁷² It must not be inferred from these figures that Humboldt constantly maintained this high rank in the dairy business, for during the following years many other counties increased their output of butter more rapidly than did Humboldt, which, in fact, after reaching 100,000 pounds in 1858 declined to 34,400 pounds in 1860, placing its rank at twelfth place.⁷³ The production of cheese increased each year, amounting to 6800 pounds in 1860; but this gave the county only thirteenth place in that industry.

The stock business developed rapidly during the later fifties, not only through natural increase but also on account of the large numbers of cattle driven into the region. In 1856 W. T. Olmstead located in the Bear River region with

⁷¹ *Humboldt Times*, Feb. 3, 1855.

⁷² California Surveyor general, *Report*, 1856.

⁷³ For 1858, *Humboldt Times*, Oct. 16, 1858; for 1860, California Surveyor general, *Report*.

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⁷⁴ Olmstead, *Statement*, MS., 1

⁷⁵ *Humboldt Times*, Aug. 23, 1

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⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 14, 1857.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1858; Oct. 27

⁷⁹ California Surveyor general

⁸⁰ *Humboldt Times*, Nov. 19, 1

300 head of cattle, which he had brought with him from Tehama County. Near him were located several other men also interested in the stock business.⁷⁴ At this time also another herd of 200 head was driven from the Sacramento Valley into the Redwood Creek region by J. P. Albee.⁷⁵ During the year 1857, many cattle were driven south from Oregon, although probably the larger number came over the trails from the Sacramento Valley or up the coast from Sonoma.⁷⁶ It was estimated in November of that year that two thousand head of cattle had entered the county since the assessor had made his supplemental report.⁷⁷

During the spring of 1858 the ranchers encountered much difficulty on account of a poisonous weed which killed many of their cattle. It does not appear to have seriously affected the cattle business, for during the year the importation of cattle steadily increased. The greatest number at this time seem to have come from the Willamette Valley, and were driven into the grazing districts in the Bald Hills as well as into the Bear and Mattole River valleys.⁷⁸ The effect upon the settlement of the region has already been noted, for with the increase in the number of cattle there followed an increase in the population of these various districts. The numbers reported by the assessor show a great increase during this period. While the report for 1854 gave only 1812 head of cattle in the county, these had increased to 3604 in 1856; 6597 in 1857; 9500 in 1858; and 19,205 in 1860.⁷⁹ At this latter date they were classed as follows: cows 4815; calves 4511; stock cattle 8620; beef cattle 460; oxen 769. In fact, the number of cattle had increased so rapidly that a contemporaneous writer, speaking of the conditions in the Mattole region, expressed concern that the ranges might soon be overstocked unless a market were found for some of the cattle.⁸⁰

Other kinds of stock had also increased in number although not in the same proportion as the cattle. In 1860 there were reported 8194 hogs, not counting 980 that had been

⁷⁴ Olmstead, *Statement*, MS., 2.

⁷⁵ *Humboldt Times*, Aug. 23, 1856.

⁷⁶ *Humboldt Times*, Apr. 11, Sept. 12, Oct. 10, Nov. 14, 1857, all contain items regarding Oregon cattle.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, Nov. 14, 1857.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, July 10, 1858; Oct. 22, 1859.

⁷⁹ California Surveyor general, *Reports*, for dates given.

⁸⁰ *Humboldt Times*, Nov. 19, 1859.

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The first engagement of the newly organized forces took place, under Captain Messec, near the Pardee Ranch on October 26.⁵¹ One of the volunteers was badly wounded, but the Indians suffered a more severe loss, four of the number being killed and several taken prisoners. After this defeat the Indians withdrew farther up the river into the Yager Creek district, where they formed a winter camp. Captain Messec led his forces in pursuit, and on November 13 and 14 attacked them in the neighborhood of Shower's Pass, killing a number and taking twenty-six prisoners. Having confined the Indians to a small area it was important that some decisive action be taken before the winter snows should have melted from the mountains. This was effected on the night of December 21, when the Indian camps were surrounded and eighty-four prisoners taken.⁵²

Having been thus successful in the attack upon the main camp, the volunteers next turned their attention to other bands, either capturing them or driving them farther into the mountains. While scouring the mountains between Redwood Creek and Hoopa Valley they routed a band of Indians who fled toward the coast in the vicinity of Dow's Prairie. Not anticipating much trouble, a small company of the volunteers took up the pursuit and made an attack, when to their surprise the hostiles were found to number about one hundred and fifty; the whites stood their ground and, in fact, took thirteen prisoners, but two of their number were wounded and they were forced to retreat. About the same time a company of men was attacked from ambush in the neighborhood of Albee's Ranch, on Redwood Creek, one of the men being badly wounded.⁵³ The reports of these engagements were depressing to the whites and encouraging to the Indians, but it was evident that the latter were being gradually weakened.

The problem of disposing of the prisoners was becoming serious, for by January, 1859, 120 were reported in the camp of Captain Messec, a number exceeding the soldiers under his command.⁵⁴ After some delay Superintendent Henley granted permission to have the Indians removed to the Mendocino Reservation, which had been established by

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 256-257.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 264-271.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 262-263.